
Sh

They call her

Story and photo by Valerie DePan — Design by Nikolina Hatton



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As a debate coach, Shannon Valdivia has earned herself a name, both with her students and the community

Mt. Hood Community College has an award-winning forensics team and has become a force to contend with on the national debate circuit. This year the team has traveled to San Diego, Los Angeles, Houston and San Francisco, as well as a variety of meets closer to home, and has brought home a bushel basket of awards.

Over the years, the team has won national championship team titles and countless individual titles and the most recent successes have come under the guidance of Shannon Valdivia, who will tell you she's a Jane of all trades and mistress of none — but her students and colleagues think more.

Dressed in black sweat pants, silver tennis shoes, multicolor sports bracelets and a casual black t-shirt from last year's Phi Kappa Delta's competition, Valdivia stands five feet tall, brunette, pixie hair-do, intelligent piercing brown eyes and

comfortably calls herself the accidental professor. Her students consider her passionate and wildly successful.

Deleana Coyle, a former MHCC debate student, said, "We nicknamed her 'Shark' because she's a fiery little woman. Shark built our reputation as the team that comes in with the underdog qualities, but with a bite that comes from life experience.

"There is a certain humbleness that comes from watching 'newbies' come in and kick some butt. The varsity holds their ground and the team takes sweeps over schools that should have beaten a community college. That right there shows the heart she creates in the team," Coyle said.

Wendy Schissel, Valdivia's supervisor and dean, says, "At almost every monthly board of education meeting, Dr. Silverman [MHCC's president] is sharing another forensics team accomplishment."

Valdivia was referred to the college by Larry Dawkins, a veteran 35-year speech and communications instructor at MHCC. She ran into him one day at a forensics competition at Linfield College. She started out as a part-timer in the winter of 1997 and came on full-time in the spring of 1998. Later, at Dawkins' request, she took over his position as forensics coach.

"Shannon is not one person; she's many," Dawkins said. "She is the best philosopher, the best historian, and the best political scientist on [MHCC's] campus. These all rolled in one makes Shannon the best forensics coach, period."

Born in 1970 in Pittsburg, Calif., Valdivia and her mom, Diane Valdivia, moved to Clatskanie, Ore., in 1979. Clatskanie is a small town in Columbia County. "It had a population of about 1,500 back then," Valdivia said. In 1986 Valdivia became active in speech debate (forensics). Her introduction to speech was a required class in sophomore year at Clatskanie High School. Her teacher,

third speech competition she wrote, titled "Declining Value System in the United States." Meanwhile, she was involved in choir and journalism; she was also the editor-in-chief for the school newspaper, while maintaining a 3.2 GPA, she said.

Valdivia's mother Diane said she always encouraged her daughter to get good grades. Valdivia was motivated and saw what it was like not to have a good education, she said. "Valdivia knew how to read at two-and-a-half years old and the special preschool she attended when she was 4 had to stop her counting when she got to number 84. Nobody knew how high she could count," Diane said. Chevron was in cahoots with Valdivia's mother, and the two conspired to find a scholarship for Valdivia. Between Valdivia's hard work, long list of awards and a recommendation from Chevron, she was offered and accepted a two-year full scholarship at Lower Columbia College in Longview, Wash., and went on to earn her associate of arts degree in communications.

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Dorothea Chevron, ironically "was afraid to speak in public," Valdivia said. After observing Valdivia, Chevron encouraged her to sign up for speech competition. Her first competition was titled "Voice of Democracy," and it was her first taste of winning.

From her first competition, "Chevron kept encouraging me to compete and kept raising the bar and her expectations," Valdivia said. She placed third in her second competition and at Chevron's persistence she tried again and took first on her

Valdivia transferred to Linfield College (McMinnville) to earn her bachelor of arts in journalism. At first, Valdivia went into broadcasting and served as the news director for two years and music director for one at Linfield's radio station, KSLC - 90.3 FM. She later changed her major because she didn't want to be a journalism- "nomad," always moving from job to job and town to town. She thought print journalism would be more grounded and stable, keeping her in one place. Her mother referred to it as base

camp — having one address.

Role models and heroes

After Linfield, Valdivia attended Portland State University but ended up transferring to Washington State University in Pullman. What inked the deal was the Murrow School of Communications, named after Edward R. Murrow, the dominant radio news personality of the 1940s due to his work during WW II. Valdivia was told about Murrow by her high school history teacher Kyle Johnson and idolized the CBS newsmen, she said. "While we were learning about WW II, Mr. Johnson handed us the transcript of Murrow's broadcast from Buchenwald. I was so moved by the picture he made with words, I told myself, 'I want to write like that.' Then I started doing research about him and found him to be an inspiration for character, charisma and objectivity in journalism. He is truly the gold standard," Valdivia said.

Valdivia's mother said her daughter was always strong willed. "Once Shannon had her mind made up, it was hard to steer her," she said. Valdivia wasn't raised by a father, but her mother said there were always plenty of role models in her life. In fact, Valdivia emphatically attributes her success as a teacher to those models who inspired her, including Ricardo Sánchez, her comparative American culture instructor at WSU.

The first time she met Sánchez, "he just looked like a warrior to me," Valdivia said. "Ricardo reminded me of pictures I had seen during the Chicano Brown Power movement of the '60s. He just had an inner power that was hard to deny." She later learned he was a famous and notorious ex-con Chicano poet. His works included "Los Clatro," "Canto Y Grito Mi Liberaction," and "Brown Bear Honey Madness." He wrote these and others while in prison and was given an honorary doctorate degree in poetry from the University of Utah. He was friends with



poets such as Gary Soto, Ana Castillo and Maya Angelou, legends in Mexican-Chicano poetry.

Sánchez took Valdivia under his wing for an independent study project, said Valdivia. He taught her to appreciate her Mexican-Chicano heritage and insisted after their initial meeting that they meet twice a week for lunch. He told her what books to read (one book each week), and which classes to take. “He didn’t make requests, he made demands,” Valdivia said.

When Sánchez met Valdivia’s mother, he told her, “You have a beautiful daughter and she’s going to do great things.” He told Valdivia to respect her mother. Sánchez died of stomach cancer in El Paso, Texas, on Sept. 9, 1995. Shortly before his death, he told Valdivia, “You have a gift and need to become a teacher. He told her that he [Sánchez] didn’t think there were enough Mexican-Chicano teachers in the classrooms.” He really drove home the importance of spreading an understanding of the Mexican-Chicano heritage, Valdivia said. Specifically, he said, “Tell people not to be afraid of us [Mexican-Chicanos].”

Valdivia recalls the WSU master’s program was extremely intense. The instructors had high expectations. “The first and second semesters were intended to weed out weaklings and kicked off with four eliminating questions

where the student had to answer three out of four correctly or you were kicked out of the program,” she said. Students had eight hours to prepare a response, which was graded by five faculty members, she said. Though Valdivia figured she was a goner, she later learned she had received one of the higher scores.

Her other guru, Alex Tan, was the chairman of the WSU Murrow School of Communication. “Tan was my adviser, the chair of my thesis committee, as well as one of my instructors,” she said. “Tan really encouraged me to get involved in the independent study with Sánchez and I am glad he did,” she said. “The experience enhanced the quality of my research, and also changed me as a person,” she said. “It’s because of Tan that this whole experience of my cultural awakening was set in motion,” she said.

Summing up her education, Valdivia points proudly to her first two years in community college; it provided the foundation and resources she needed in graduate school, she said. Valdivia’s mother recommends community colleges because they provide a lot of support that universities don’t. In between, Linfield was like the lighthouse that provided guidance and direction. At WSU, Valdivia got in touch with her Mexican-Chicano heritage, which ultimately

Contributed Photo

The MHCC forensics team celebrates at the Diablo Valley College Tournament in January 2006 after winning the sweepstakes trophy in front. Back Row: Tori Zanzalari, Lawrence Behmer and assistant coach Jeff Fisher. Middle Row: Sean Robinson, Judge Yvonne Casey-McFiren, Jay Sabin, Nikki Fisher and Natalie Fetsch. Front: Head coach Shannon Valdivia.

grounded her as a teacher and coach.

Connecting with students

Valdivia's former students are now among the MHCC part-time faculty, says Schissel. "They want to come here to teach because they know they were taught well," Schissel said.

As a teacher, Shark "places issues on the table that are controversial and current," said former student Coyle. "She wants to create an emotional response and teach the student to harness the passion of the emotion but be able to take a subjective stance, on either side," she said.

Shawn LameBull, another former student who has known Valdivia for seven years, said, "The key to her ability to teach is her approachability. As an instructor who did not rely on stilted propriety, Shark's ability to interact on an interpersonal level was dramatically increased. The result is that her students have an opportunity to move beyond rhetoric and truly begin communicating. What makes this even more notable is the broad scope of life experiences that her students possessed."

Yvonne Casey-McFiren, a former student who has known Valdivia for three years, said, "Shannon has an unwavering passion for genuine discourse because learning the other perspective shifts one's reality and hopefully expands one's awareness, knowledge and world. She fluidly infuses such passion. It's contagious.

"Shannon is hip to a room even before she enters," Casey-McFiren said. "Shannon would tell you she is only doing her job; however she practices with grace and humility. Those qualities keep her grounded and constant.

"I've known Shannon to give students meals, clothes, Christmas gifts for their children and almost anything you could imagine in between. Shannon grows lovely kids," Casey-McFiren said. "She has an innate ability to see possibility in people and is highly skilled at guiding people to

also see that in them."

Valdivia's students at MHCC have earned seven national individual event parliamentary debate titles as well as a team national championship title in 2006. Many others have placed second and third. Coyle says, "Shark digs for students that are outside of the classic mold of success and transforms their unique qualities, quirks and beliefs into sophistication and creativity. The point is she encourages success by making students try even when losing a few rounds, experience brilliant moments and ultimately come out a better person at the end of the day."

"We never felt like we weren't good enough to compete with high-tuition

photographs, she said. She also reads ferociously to keep up with issues. "Once you stop learning, you're dead," she said. Valdivia's mother said that though winters are the craziest for her daughter, Valdivia just grins and bears it. Valdivia maintains her sense of humor and keeps on laughing, Diane said.

Coyle says, "Shark is not only committed to her students but is deeply committed to taking care of her mother." Shark's mother lives with her daughter, who is her primary caregiver. Her mother was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma in 2002 and is undergoing chemotherapy. She's also diabetic. They are both more concerned about her diabetes, a chronic living condition.

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"The great thing about Shark is that no matter what has happened, she has managed to support and respect her students and her team," Coyle said.

The MHCC forensics team travels throughout the year and a typical day on the road starts at 7 a.m. and doesn't end until 10 p.m., Valdivia said. "It's hard to have a personal life," Valdivia said, "when you're on the road all the time." One year, she collapsed from exhaustion and was hospitalized, she said. Since then, she has figured out a way to balance her days. In her spare time, which is rare, Valdivia unwinds at the beach and loves to shoot

Many students have had the opportunity to see Valdivia and her mother hash out a debate, Coyle said. "Their combined wisdom is really amazing to see," Coyle said.

LameBull says, "Her focus [is] on the team. That team was like a family when I was a member," he said. "Many of us are still close friends to this very day. Shark shaped leaders and many of her former students have gone on to coach in some capacity," he said. Valdivia says she loves her students. She views them as extended family. To this day, she is friends with a number of former students.

"Shark is just is a very special person and has long-term effects on people," says Coyle. "To this day, [we] still call her coach, even though she is so much more than that. Thank you, Shark."